

MY TWO CENTS' WORTH

Giving me directions? Get ready to name names

Do me a favor.
If there's any chance that you're ever going to invite someone to your home who has never been there before, puh-leeze go outside as soon as possible and write down the names of the nearby streets and highways, and come up with a safe, simple route to your front door.



AGNES DIGGS

Take a walk, or take a drive with a navigator, but do it. Write down the names, include some landmarks — the kind that people will actually recognize, like golden arches or other advertising icons.

I can't tell you how many times I have asked for directions to a place and received a long, complicated answer that included stuff like "there's an intersection with a four-way stop sign but I don't know the name of the streets."

Can't really fault folks for not knowing street names, though, since many local signs are often green and submerged in a sea of foliage. But have pity on those of us who are strangers to your area. Give us something to work with. A commercial strip? An architectural oddity? A dirt

► DIGGS, F-2

HOW HAS YOUR LIFE CHANGED SINCE SEPT. 11, 2001?

On the morning of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, many people said the world had changed forever. Americans would pull together, and an international outpouring of compassion helped us in our grief.

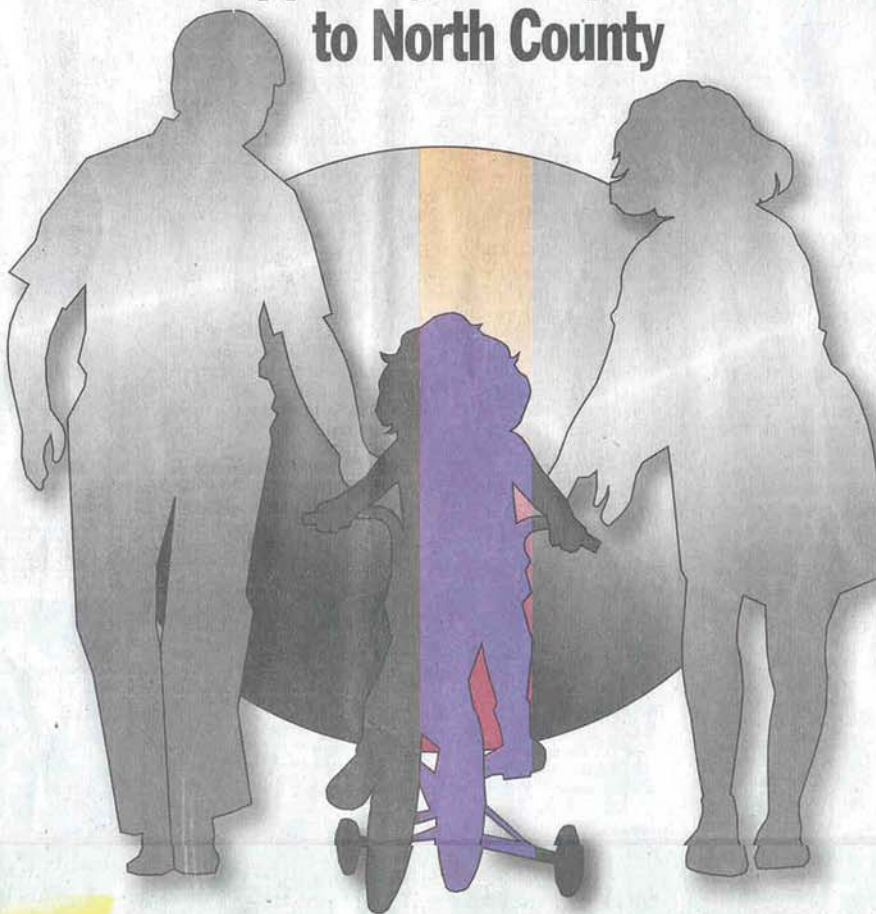
Irony, they said, died that day, as did our short-attention-span fascination with the trivial. News about celebrity scandals would be replaced with meaningful investigations, historical perspectives and analysis of international events.

As the second anniversary of the attacks approaches, it's easy to see that many predictions after Sept. 11 have not come true. That is not to say, however, that some things have not changed.

Has anything about you or your life changed because of 9-11? Please contact the North County Times to share your story, which will be published in September.

Send e-mail to gwarth@nctimes.com or call (760) 740-5410.

Child-support system opens outreach to North County



NCT ILLUSTRATION

Educating parents

Story by Agnes Diggs ■ Staff Writer

Henrietta Steele addressed her attentive audience with the fervor and energy of an old-time Baptist preacher leading a small flock to salvation. And the group of 30 women and one man listened raptly — for themselves and for the children who are counting on them to provide life's essentials.

The listeners are called custodial parents, and Steele is a community outreach coordinator, a 20-year veteran of the state's Department of Child Support Services.

"I'm here to demystify the process for you and educate you on what is about to happen once you open up a case with us," she said in a rich voice that reached every corner of the room.



■ For information about California's child support program, visit www.childsup.ca.gov, or call (866) 230-CARE or (619) 236-7600.

Steele's presentation was part of a new-case orientation class, an informal workshop designed to help parents understand the child support system,

to inform them of the services the department offers and to provide realistic expectations of what's available.

Orientations are conducted at four San Diego County locations. The Vista library, the only North County venue, hosts a presentation on the first Tuesday of each month. Since the Vista classes began in January, more than 200 people have attended.

Participants must call ahead for an application package that must be filled out and brought to the session. The 90-minute presentation includes one-on-one meetings with caseworkers who help in the application process.

To be eligible, the parent must have physical custody of

Dawdlers, delayers: It's never too late

■ Always-tardy habit can be broken, says expert

KAY HARVEY
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

Eydie Miller arrived at the hotel for her brass quartet performance with no time to spare.

Running late, she was on the road when she realized she left behind the skirt that completed her all-black ensemble.

"I passed a huge banquet room where the tables were being set for a fancy dinner," said the 39-year-old St. Paul, Minn., working mom. "I noticed the tablecloths were black — the rest is history."

People who arrive late often tap their creativity to save face, surveys show. Aside from the annoyance for those kept waiting, everything usually turns out OK. That's the perpetual hope of millions of Americans — at least 15 to 20 percent of the population, surveys show — who are chronically late.

Among excuses they've shared are these:

■ The dog peed on my clothes.

■ The cat turned off my alarm clock.

■ The pantyhose I bought are so short I had to walk with my knees together, and that took a long time.

Sometimes, creativity isn't enough. Some have lost school credits, jobs, friendships, romantic relationships — even marriages — as a result of running late.

If you're one of them, you probably know it doesn't help much to get up earlier or take a vow of punctuality. The lateness habit, which can make prompt people furious, is a tough one to break.

"Telling a chronically late person to be on time is like telling an overweight person not to eat so much," said Diana DeLonzor, author of a new book on the subject. To break the pattern, she said, late people must identify the psychological forces that underlie their habit and reprogram the ways they think.

Then, they can focus on the goal: getting there on time.

Why we're late

A mix of subconscious behaviors puts people behind,

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► DAWDLERS, F-2

► PARENTS

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must have physical custody of the child or children, or court-ordered child support that is past due. Classes are also offered in Spanish.

Steele stressed that services are provided free to San Diego County families.

Good news for applicants like Avy, a 33-year-old Vista mother who attended the orientation to get help from the father of her 9-month-old son. He acknowledged paternity at birth and agreed to help financially, she said, but failed to keep his promise.

"It's a wonderful service," Avy said. "You don't need an attorney. I can't afford an attorney, and neither can he."

Cry for help

Avy, not her real name, said she and her son's father had made a friendly agreement for monthly support in March, but it didn't work out.

"We tried it on our own," she said. "But he's not doing it, so we're forced to force it, I guess."

The soft-spoken mother told of "astronomical" rents and huge child-care expenses, costs she can't meet on her office-manager salary. She can't get any state assistance, she said, so she must rely on the father.

"I was really hesitant to start anything because we haven't gone to court about anything, and I didn't want to," she said. "But I don't know why I should have to struggle, and he doesn't have to help — at least a little. Even if he had tried just a little, I wouldn't have done this."

After listening to Steele's presentation, Avy met with a department caseworker who helped her take her first step — filing her case. The paperwork isn't very complicated, Avy said, but it's very thorough, with lots of questions. The hardest part was figuring out all the expenses, so it's somewhat time-consuming. The caseworker helped her through it all.

"It made me confident and comfortable that everything was complete," Avy said.

Cindy, (not her real name), a 35-year-old Oceanside resident, said she has been engaged in a contentious three-year struggle over financial support with her 8-year-old daughter's father.

The harried mom carried her accumulated paperwork in a backpack half her size. It was stuffed with folders full of documents detailing a history of domestic violence, restraining orders and her attempts to collect unpaid and overdue money.

A growing sense of urgency, prompted by the fact that she was laid off in January, compelled her to force her husband's financial assistance. Her worries are compounded by hundreds of dollars in expenses amassed by her daughter's medical needs, she said.

She came to the class to learn how to move her case forward on her own after depleting her funds paying for lawyers who didn't get results, she said.

"I have no faith in the judicial system and the way it works," she said. "I have faith in this system. And the speaker? (Steele) They need to elect her president of the United States. She can get things moving."

The county program has several advantages, Cindy said. She provides the infor-



J.T. LOVETTE / FOR THE NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Henrietta Steele from San Diego County's Child Support Services gives a seminar at the Vista library to parents seeking to open or enforce already-open child-support cases. "When we know more, we can make better choices," she says.

mation, and they help her get the support money. The program has access to resources even attorneys don't have, she said, and the department's presentation simplified the process.

And Cindy saw a little something more.

"I love the fact that it's in a library," she said. "It takes it away from the court atmosphere. At the DA's office, you have to go through all the screens and everything."

The Who

The County of San Diego Department of Child Support Services was established in October 2001 on the heels of reform legislation in 1999 that created the State Department of Child Support Services, which began operating in January 2000. Before that, child support was handled through the district at-

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— AVY,

Taking the orientation class

torney's office and was called the Bureau of Child Support Services.

The department establishes, enforces and modifies child support orders; collects and distributes payments; handles genetic testing to determine paternity and locates noncustodial parents.

What it does not do is represent the parents, handle custody or visitation issues, release information about the noncustodial parent to outside parties, or share information about one parent with another, Steele said.

"We're not your attorneys. You have a caseworker, and they only deal with child support issues."

In her class, Steele used a slide show to explain what the department could and couldn't do for the parents, how payments are applied and what tools the department has to bring the delinquent spouse into compliance.

The How

Several sources are available to assist in the search, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, the postal service, utility companies, and military and employment records.

The state's Employment Development Department maintains a database called the California New Employee Registry that contains new-hire information reported by employers. It lists names, addresses, Social Security numbers, and information on independent contractors to help locate the self-employed.

The National Directory of New Hires is a central database comprising employment and unemployment insurance and wage information drawn from each state. The Federal Parent Locator Service can provide information about noncustodial parents anywhere in the United States. And parents who are thinking of leaving the state to avoid their obligations should know that the federal Uniform Interstate Family Support Act requires states to work together in child-support matters.

Steele told the group that the department also has what she calls "attention grabbers." She clicked to the "show me the money" screen, displaying enforcement tools: professional license suspension, interception of lottery winnings, unemployment benefits, tax refunds, inheritances, workers' compensation benefits or insurance settlements.

The department can suspend any license issued in the state of California, up to and including a fishing license. It can report unpaid support as bad debts to major credit bureaus, levy bank accounts, garnish wages, and use real property liens to gain compliance. And if an arrearage exceeds \$5,000, the department can refuse to issue or renew a passport. Interest on arrearages is calculated at 10 percent per year.

Once payments have been received, identified and posted, they are disbursed to the custodial parent within 48 hours.

The department

Directed by Thomas Boardman, with a staff of about 740, the department closed the fiscal year in June with about 139,000 active cases on file. In its first full year as a

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separate agency, it distributed \$150 million in payments — a 7 percent increase from last year, said Leslie McNeely, a child support representative who works in enforcement. Of that amount, about \$47 million went to reimburse federal, state and county public assistance funds.

Functioning in the looming shadow of state budget cuts, the department will still strive to reach its goal of improving customer service and collections, said public affairs officer John Rosenthal. Fortunately, the department had anticipated budget cuts 6 to 8 months ago in the last fiscal year, he said, and staff members are trying to stay ahead of the curve by increasing collections and customer service.

One way to offset the budget cuts is through the automated systems that the department is hoping to install in the next few months, Rosenthal said. That would enable noncustodial parents to make credit-card payments online and enable staff to distribute payments to custodial parents through electronic transfers.

A plan to increase staff had to be put on hold because of cuts, Rosenthal said, but staff is being assigned to the most critical areas. The satellite classes won't be cut. The long-range plan is to be able to conduct court procedures at the Vista courthouse and arrange matters so that people won't have to go downtown to conduct business for child support, he said.

"Given the budget cutbacks, I don't know if that's reasonable to expect this year, but that's certainly on our horizon," Rosenthal said.

Marching orders

Henrietta Steele has been making the Vista presentations since the beginning of the year. She said she believes holding them in the community helps get the word out to more people, who will then be less reluctant to come in for help.

"It breaks the stigma of the child support program — that you have to be on welfare to receive child support services," she said in a later conversation. "And if they didn't know what to expect before (the class)? Now they know."

Sometimes those who come to the orientations are already frustrated, beaten down and disillusioned, Steele said. Her self-imposed marching orders are to walk them through the process to make sure they can make better choices to get their financial support.

"That's why I'm up there," she said. "And I honestly do believe that education is power. When we know more, we can make better choices."

Her advice for custodial parents who meet the criteria and find themselves in need of help?

"Let the process work for you," Steele said.

For more about California's child support program, visit the Web site at www.childsup.ca.gov, or call (866) 230-CARE or (619) 236-7600.

Contact staff writer Agnes Diggs at (760) 740-3511 or adiggs@nctimes.com.

CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES INFORMATION

In recognition of its efforts, the California Department of Child Support Services on Aug. 6 received the Most Improved Program Award of Excellence for 2003 from the National Child Support Enforcement Association. NCSEA is the national umbrella organization of more than 65,000 child-support professionals in all 50 states, U.S. territories, tribal nations and a number of foreign countries.

These facts are from the Department of Child Support

Services:

■ More than a quarter of American children — nearly 17 million — don't live with their father.

■ 15 percent of noncustodial parents on active child-support cases in San Diego County are the moms. That equates to more than 20,000 women locally.

■ Child support is money paid toward a child's living expenses and health insurance.

■ Every dollar budgeted by the state for local child support is matched by \$2 from

the federal government. Thus, every dollar cut from California's child support budget results in the loss of \$2 in federal funds.

■ In an average month, the department receives 40,000 phone calls, processes 125,000 pieces of incoming mail, sends 180,000 pieces of outgoing correspondence and opens 800 new cases.

■ San Diego County is part of a child-support computer network that includes Los Angeles and Orange counties. Eventually, the whole state will

be on the same automated system.

■ Custody issues are addressed through Family Court Services. In North County, call (760) 940-4433.

■ Family Law Facilitators are available at local self-help centers on a first come, first served, space available basis. In North County, 325 S. Melrose Drive, North Building, Vista. Sign-in times: 7:15 a.m. and noon. Sessions begin at 8:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. weekdays.